

Winter 2006

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Recommended Citation

Fambrough, Monica (2006) "Politics and Poetics in Juliana Spahr's This Connection of Everyone With Lungs," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 65 , Article 58.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss65/58>

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Politics and Poetics in Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*

University of California Press

By Monica Fambrough

We begin with cells, and in beginning with cells, already we are taking on a fundamental contradiction.

There are these things:

cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells

Cells connect with each other—they combine to form living organisms, but they are also autonomous. They function as individual units of a whole: separate yet connected. Cells divide to become larger entities, hands and feet and lungs. Millions of cells connect and form a larger organism. As humans, we are individuals, but we contain multitudes. This kind of contradiction, which we might consider to be a paradox, can also be observed in the geographical and political make-up of the United States. Fifty individual units combine to make a nation: separate yet connected.

In *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*, Juliana Spahr takes advantage of one of poetry's great capacities: the capacity to transport contradictions from the realm of abstraction to the realm of the concrete and vice versa. Poetry can recognize a contradiction without taking sides. And as this work shows, in a complex political climate, taking sides offers dangerous comfort.

Writing as a resident of Hawaii, the state that perhaps most exemplifies the U.S.'s geographical and political paradox, Spahr explores the concept of complicity. If we are all like Hawaii, apart yet connected, in what ways are we complicit in the activities of our various contiguous parts? How responsible are the cells for the behavior of the larger organism, however far removed?

I speak of those moments when we do not understand why we must be joined or separated in the most mundane ways.

I speak of why our skin is our largest organ and how it keeps us contained.

As the book moves on from the abstraction and biology of these earlier statements, into more politically explicit territory, it becomes clear that our sense of separation is what renders us incapable of seeing our own complicity in the behaviors of larger systems. It makes us feel simultaneously blameless and inert. The mundane ways we often feel connected to each other make us dull to the actual potential and consequences of our actions. The warehouse and the distributor and the mall and the salesclerk separate us from the Indonesian laborer who makes our blouse, but they also connect us to her.

The accumulation of small connections, the way they make a body, a country, and a universe, comes to life in the first section of Spahr's book: a series of repeated and accumulating phrases that form a three-page introduction to the larger second section.

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room in and out

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and
the space around the hands and the space of the room and the
space of the building that surrounds the room in and out

The tediousness of the accumulation building to large paragraphs lends the poem an "Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly" sense of irresistible inevitability. We know where we are headed ("Perhaps she'll die...") but we become attached to the steps necessary to getting there. And we become aware of the significance of even minute variation. From a post-structural standpoint, at least, variation within repetition is a powerful form of resistance, linguistically or socially, because it demonstrates that change is possible even in hegemonic structures.

And resistance is called for, as the second section of *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* artfully announces. But it is an unexpected kind of resistance. The long piece, "Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003" stretches like an enormous skin across the remaining 64 pages of the book, which are appropriately divided by separate yet connected dated sections.

What the skin contains is a different sort of accumulation. Repetition occurs but is less restrained, erratic. The content ambitiously reaches from nature towards politics, and from geography towards pop culture. Page after page,

the tone remains flat—masterfully and relentlessly consistent—emphasizing the level to which beauty and atrocity can become mundane information. The even tone helps to unite disparate elements and emotions, forcing the reader to consider how separation and connection, difference and sameness, work together to make meaning.

While we turned sleeping uneasily Liam Gallagher brawled and irate fans complained that “Popstars: The Rivals” was fixed.

While we turned sleeping uneasily the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of whether university admissions may favor racial minorities.

While we turned sleeping uneasily poachers caught sturgeon in the reed-fringed Caspian, which shelters boar and wolves, and some of the residents on the space shuttle planned a return flight to the US.

Reading the poems is like getting your news from the Internet. Internet news is the great equalizer. It gives us Iraq and Angelina simultaneously without taking sides. What Spahr reminds us is that Iraq and Angelina are connected. While she is occupied with Brad, and we are occupied with their exclusive *Us Weekly* photo spread, Iraq is occupied by the U.S.

But the beach on which we reclined is occupied by the US military so every word we said was shaped by other words, every moment of beauty occupied.

As the book concludes, language and poetry become occupied. Everyday speech is pre-empted:

When we talk about how the Florida nurse died of smallpox vaccination and how sperm may sniff their way to eggs we talk also of M109A6 Paladin Howitzers and the M270 multiple-launch rocket system.

Finally, the violence occupies the bodies of beloveds in lines that draw the seeming contradictions together, in bed with each other:

When I wrap around yours bodies, I wrap around the USS Abraham Lincoln, unmanned aerial vehicles, and surveillance.

The mistrust implied by surveillance is appropriate, because the intimacy with

machines of war is not entirely abstract. No matter who we are, no matter where we are from, we are connected with these things. As are the lovers who lay beside us. The end of Spahr's book is a fantastic nightmare in which our complicity in the atrocity of war is made manifest in our bodies and language. We do not actually control what we say, and words we didn't know we knew pour from our mouths. Involuntarily, we confess.

This Connection of Everyone With Lungs refuses to be comfortable with the expected messages and means of political expression. It knows organic language and forms, as opposed to catch phrases and direct attacks, make the most convincing arguments. It aims concerns not only at the warmongers, but also at the peacemakers. What is ultimately implied by Spahr's poetry is that by thinking of ourselves as blamelessly on the side against the war, we prevent ourselves from acknowledging our connection to it, as well as to its victims.